

Football Axioms... When In Doubt Principles: Know When They Apply!

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Players, coaches and fans would cringe if they knew we had doubt on a call. Few realize this happens more than we'd like to admit. That's precisely why the "Axioms of Football Officiating" were developed. They are the key principles that if followed, allow us to get the call right more times than not. What's not been written or discussed is the mechanics of these Axioms. Which official gets to apply "when in doubt" and which official[s] should not.

Let's look first at the difference between having a call and having doubt. When you have a call, you're in good position, you've seen the whole play, you simply just make the call. The Axioms do not apply. When you have primary responsibility and you didn't see the whole play... good mechanics or not, you need to use the Axioms to have a better shot at a correct call.

Now let's discuss when you are not the primary official covering a play. Emphatically, the Axioms or "when in doubt principles" **DO NOT APPLY!!!** They are strictly for the covering official who has primary responsibility. It's the difference between having a call and having an opinion. You have doubt as a non-covering official but the primary official has a call. Stay out of it unless the covering official needs your help, and even then understand the difference between having a call and an opinion.

Let's look at a few of the key Axioms that occur game after game...

- A. **It's a touchback rather than a safety or momentum.** Too often we see officials not in position try to sell a safety call when in fact, the ball never came out of the end zone. This is a fundamental axiom that needs to be followed. Don't put cheap points on the board and have the team giving up the ball on the ensuing free kick.
- B. **The forward pass is incomplete rather than a fumble.** More times than not, the receiver never controlled the ball long enough to do something common to the game... run, pass or kick. Make sure that a receiver has tucked the ball away with control before ruling a fumble. More times than not, the receiver is out numbered by the defense and has no chance to recover the ball. Make these plays incomplete!
- C. **The ball is accidentally batted/kicked rather than intentionally batted/kicked.** I heard a veteran official say "I know a bat when I see it. The player usually hits it about 350 feet over the fence." An over simplification, but one we should consider. Make the bat or kick obvious and intentional for everyone to see, not some little swipe and nick of the ball.
- D. **The passer has thrown the ball forward rather than fumbling it.** Any action by the QB's arm moving forward and the ball coming out should be ruled a forward pass. Even if the arm is going forward, untouched and the QB loses the ball as he tries to

pull it back. The human eye is not that good to see the full aspect of this motion. Again, ruling these fumbles will result in more cheap turnovers than correct calls.

- E. ***It's a fumble rather than the runner down.*** Over the years, replays show that nearly 90% of the fumble/down situations are fumbles. You take any chance of help from your crew away when you blow the whistle without seeing the ball dead by rule. Let the play continue and get help from a crewmate. Again, inadvertent whistles are tough to explain and usually a huge inequity occurs by rule when they happen.

One Axiom that needs some discussion and reconsideration is “When in doubt it is an incomplete pass/trap rather than a completed pass.” If we haven’t seen the ball touch the ground why would we call it incomplete? If you see it touch the ground, make the call... incomplete pass. If you aren’t sure, look for help from another covering official, maybe even the umpire. Don’t take a good athletic play away from a receiver.

Axioms can be game savers but they don’t excuse us from the responsibility of why we’re out there. Put yourself in position to make the call by using sound officiating mechanics, rule knowledge and good common sense. But never give up your responsibility to **MAKE THE CALL!**